Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

Please Stop ROLLING!

By Lt. John Isaacson

It started off as a five-hour pilot trainer and was my third flight as an instructor pilot. I had to complete two events that, together, would cover every P-3 emergency and malfunction we learn. We worked through multiple-preflight issues and still planned to have the necessary daylight to complete both events.

As the instructor flight engineer (IFE) and I walked in the hangar (to bounce one more question off the maintenance officer), the operations officer approached me with, "Catfish, I need you to do something for me on your flight."

I'm thinking, "Oh no, drive-by tasking."

It turned out we needed to bring a load of CADs to a Canadian airfield so their C-130s could take them to Chile for a detachment. I never would get off the deck in time to get both events done, so we cancelled one of them. I could tell it would be one of those days.

We made sure our cargo was secured and adjusted our training profile to accomplish a portion of the training en route. We would land in

Canada, drop off the CADs, then complete the remaining training, which we considered to be unsafe with the CADs onboard.

I was in the left seat, the copilot (student) was in the right seat, and the student flight engineer (SFE) was in the FE's seat. We shut down the engines and completed the secure checklist. As we were getting out of our seats, the SFE asked the IFE if he had simulated a hydraulic system quantity loss in our No. 1 system. The IFE replied, "No," and directed him to secure the hydraulic pump. The system still indicated pressure, so the IFE told the SFE to turn on another pump to assist in troubleshooting a possible gauge malfunction. The system pressure started bleeding off, going from 3,200 to 0 psi in about three seconds; we immediately secured the pump.

I looked out of the aircraft and noticed the lineman pointing at our port mainmount. The IFE and I went aft to exit the aircraft and to verify the hydraulic leak. As the ladder lowered, we noticed hydraulic fluid raining from the port wheelwell. By the time the ladder was completely down, the hydraulic fluid had flowed aft, past the ladder. We looked for the leak, and I noticed the lineman did not put in the chocks after shutdown—the aircraft started inching aft. The IFE told the lineman we needed chocks, and I ran up the ladder to see if we had any onboard. As I stepped into the aircraft, I quickly learned how slippery hydraulic fluid is. I found myself on my back a split second after I stepped off the ladder's non-skid. I didn't find any chocks but thought the lineman soon would be returning with them.

We needed to find something to secure the aircraft until we were able to get a set of chocks. As I went down the ladder, I spotted a forklift with a wooden pallet that was to be used for downloading the CADs. I was talking to the forklift operator about using the pallet, when I heard a loud pop. I turned around and noticed the ladder was bending forward and "popping" as it bounced aft because the aircraft had picked up speed. I directed the copilot to raise the ladder and proceeded to take the pallet. As I looked aft of the aircraft, I noticed two antennae that each wing could strike, and, if the P-3 got past them, a ditch, a fire hydrant, and a hangar. My heart immediately sank as I thought, "I signed for this aircraft." I dragged the pallet off the forklift and I noticed two puffs of smoke coming from the plane's starboard side, but I couldn't tell where they were coming from. The smoke then stopped. I tried to shove the pallet behind the mainmount when I again noticed the smoke. I asked the IFE if he knew what it was, and he said he had told the copilot to use the emergency brake. The smoke actually was atomized hydraulic fluid from the emergency-brake system, which is a normal by-product of its use. I had my hands over my eyes, peeking through my fingers in hopes the aircraft would stop without damage.

The aircraft came to a stop approximately 15 to 20 feet before the mainmounts reached the edge of the tarmac, and then it began rolling forward. Great, now how far is it going to roll forward? The aircraft finally settled into a slight dip with no damage. We found the hydraulic hose for the main brake had blown upstream of the brake fuse, which is designed to prevent complete loss of hydraulic fluid. Our squadron sent a rescue aircraft and crew for us that evening, and the aircraft was repaired and returned to the squadron that night.

What could we have done differently? I now inspect that hose more closely on preflight. Since there is no backup system to the parking brake, the only sure way to prevent a 100,000-pound aircraft from rolling out of control is to bring your own chocks, especially when you are going to a foreign field.

Lt. Isaacson flew with VP-40 and is currently with VT-2.

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